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At the origins of the Political Discourse of the 5-Star Movement (M5S): Internet, direct democracy, and the “future of the past.”

Introduction

The 5-star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) is an Italian political actor operating almost exclusively online. It was officially established in 2009, and in less than ten years it has become the most important political force in Italy. In the general elections of March 2018, it has established itself as the first party by a large margin; at the time of writing, it is conducting negotiations to form a government.¹ The party thrives as the ultimate protest movement, thanks to a carefully crafted populist communication strategy that insists on considering the M5S neither left or right-wing (Orazi and Socci, 2014), but draws from both areas of protest vote. In addition, compared to the other parties' electoral performances, the M5S is the only list capable of attracting preferences across all Italian regions, appearing to be the only national-level party in the country (Diamanti et al., 2013).

The scholarship agrees that the undisputed element of novelty in the Italian political landscape is its relation with the web (Mosca et al, 2015). The 5-star Movement did not simply adapt its communication to digital tools, like most parties in Italy and Europe have done, to various degrees, over the past years (Voerman et al., 2002; Schweitzer 2008 and 2011): the 5-star Movement was established *because* of the World Wide Web (Vaccari, 2012). The M5S is the first major political force that was established and operates exclusively online; the web is not just a medium, but the centre of the party's ideology, which focusses on the realisation of direct democracy through digital technologies. According to Bordignon and

¹ *Electoral compass for the 2018 Italian general elections*, available at cattaneo.org [Accessed 12 March 2018]. The M5S reached 32.66% of votes, well above the traditional political forces of the Democratic Party (18.72%), the Northern League (17.37%), and Forza Italia (14.01%)

Ceccarini, the M5S makes an “ideological use of the Internet” (2014, p. 55); others have dubbed it “web-populism” (Campani, 2018).

This might not seem like a *unicum*, as other protest parties that operate mainly online and advocate internet governance as a main point in their programmes have recently sprung, from the Pirate Parties in Central and Northern Europe to GeenPeil in the Netherlands (see among others Burkart, 2014; Demker, 2014). However, unlike all other web-based political forces, the M5S was never a single-issue Movement, nor a fringe protest party: it is an institutionalized mass party, and the most pivotal actor of the Italian political system since at least 2013 (De Giorgi, 2015). One feature of the M5S’ political discourse is its vehement “anti-partitism,” characterised by constant declarations of *not* being a political party but *the* “people’s movement.” According to classic studies such as Duverger (1954) or Sartori, however, a party is “any political group identified by an official label that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections (free or non-free), candidates for public office” (1976, p. 63); this definition can fully apply to the M5S (see Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013; Biorcio and Natale, 2013; Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2014; Biorcio, 2014; Tronconi, 2015). Still, the M5S built its image of not being a party precisely *because* it operates on the web rather than through offices, congresses, and the other standard tools of Italian parties.

Unlike other protest movements rising in Europe in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis (such as Podemos in Spain or AfD in Germany) furthermore, the M5S tries to maintain its original “ideologically neutral” outlook, claiming to be neither right or left oriented, but a neutral radical force of change. Consequently, its position on key (and divisive) issues strongly oscillates, and is characterised by constant ambiguity. This contradictory praxis is the main feature of the M5S’ populist style (Moffit, 2016), and it is one of the reasons why the M5S is considered by many observers to belong alternatively to the populist extreme right or to the radical left. Populism, in this respect, is a highly controversial concept. Scholars with

different disciplinary backgrounds have provided different explanations. In political theory, it can be defined as an ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Taggart, 2000) or as a political strategy (Laclau, 2005). Consequently, four main schools of thought specified populism: as illiberalism (Pappas, 2016), as communication style (de La Torre, 2010; Jager and Walgrave, 2007), as a new form of Cesarism (Roberts, 2006) or as a defined ideology (Albertazzi and McDonnel, 2008) albeit ‘thin’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Recently, scholarship has largely re-utilized the “chameleonic” concept (Taggart, 2000) in confronting the crisis of representation that affects European democracies, and all these interpretations have been utilized to unpack the success of the M5S in the Italian political system. For some, the rise of the M5S is in line with Italian previous anti-political movements such as the Northern League (Mazzoleni, 2008; Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013; Biancalana, 2014; Albertazzi and McDonnel, 2015); for others, the M5S is a potential emancipatory force capable to re-insert “the people” into political action (Gerbaudo and Screti, 2017). Finally, according to Vittori (2017) the M5S has lost all indicators of populism and has become a conventional “sovereigntist” political actor (Vittori, 2017). The possible correlations between the rise of populism and the web is a developing field in social sciences; for this article, suffice to highlight that all “populist” interpretations of the M5S indicate the Internet as the sole instrument for its populism, in line with recent research (for a summary, Pajnik and Sauer, 2018).

Since 1994 – the beginning of the so-called “Second Republic” – the Italian political system has suffered a process of harsh polarization and, for some observers, it has become sclerotic and exposed to constant delegitimization (Foot, 2014). In addition, it has been hegemonized by the controversial political figure of media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, to the extent that some scholars have interpreted his governments as a new type of disfigured democracy (Ventura, 2012; Urbinati, 2014), and a “telecracy” (Stiegler, 2008). It was in this

cultural and political landscape that the introduction of a party refusing the traditional means of communication – above all television, over which Berlusconi almost enjoyed monopoly – to adopt exclusively web-driven organisational tools, created, if not a new, at least a “different” cleavage (Ceccarini and Bordignon, 2016). The political culture of the M5S, which revolves entirely around a sort of “web mystique,” was installed upon a political landscape already stressed by the centrality of the television communication process (Chadwick, 2017).

But again, the web is not just a medium for the M5S. Unlike traditional political forces, the Movement does not have headquarters or non-digital types of communication; since its origins and until January 2018, activists gathered around Beppe Grillo’s blog (www.beppegrillo.it); the blog fulfilled the function of place for debate, party’s house organ, and voting platform. Beppe Grillo, the main “spokesperson” and “guarantor” of the M5S, was in charge of what was not only the replacement for traditional party newspapers and communication channels, but an integral part of the M5S’s evolution and history. All the important passages of the party’s life and evolution, from deciding upon the electoral strategy and programmes, to select the candidates for the elections, are performed on the blog. The literature on politics on the internet and the debate on normalisation V equalisation/revolution has focussed on communication strategies, information exchange, online campaigning and engagement (Resnick, 1997; Hirzalla et al, 2010; Wright 2011; Schweitzer, 2011; How et al., 2016; Hatakka, 2017). Compared to the case studies analysed in this scholarship, or compared to the other “web-parties” in Europe, the M5S differs in three main aspects: it developed from the blog, rather than the contrary; digital technologies are not a medium, but the basis upon which to build a new type of direct democracy; it immediately established itself not as a fringe, or even medium-weight party, but as the most relevant political force in one of the largest European countries.

While a sizable literature on the M5S has grown in recent years, this corpus of research has not yet focussed on the role of the blog and its discursive relationship with the M5S' ideology. The originality of the M5S as a subject of study consists in a network of historical continuity and discontinuity which involves scholars of political systems and political parties, electoral studies, media and communication studies, but also interrogates the Internet historiography: for scholars interested in studying the evolution of the M5S, the blog is the most important (if not the only) primary source available.

The aim of this article is two-fold: it provides a qualitative analysis of the first Italian web-party in relation with the potential development of Italian political historiography, and it enquires into the origins of the M5S and its discursive evolution on the blog. Firstly, the paper provides a short history of the blog www.beppegrillo.it, showing the interactions between the medium and the evolution of Italy's first web-party. The functioning mechanisms of an "online only" party that refuses to conform to the standard organisation of political actors in democratic regimes is also analysed. Secondly, through a selection of blog posts from 2008 (when the M5S entered officially the political arena) until December 2017, the paper tries to determine what is the main political discourse underlying the M5S on two key "ideological issues:" migration and the European Union, and how the party's positions have evolved over the years. Because of the nature of the sources, exclusively web-based - a novelty in the study of Italian political history - a foreword dedicated to the methodology is included.

M5S and "the future of the past." Some annotations on the methodology

It is well-known that at the origins of the historiographical revolution of the *Annales* and the introduction of the concept of *longue durée* by the French historian Fernand Braudel there

was “a problem of information overload” (Guldi and Armitage 2014, p. 88) like the one we are facing today; the challenge of ‘big data’ affects history as much as any other discipline. What Guldi and Armitage underline – like Braudel and the *Annales* before them – is that any technological development, and the ‘Internet revolution’ is not different, poses new theoretical and methodological questions. In the case of the relations between political history and web technologies, is not a shortage of sources which is in discussion, but the enormous corpus of data produced: how to interrogate it and how to contextualize it remains the core purpose of the historical reflection (Virilio, 1998). It is also important to stress that it is not the first time that humanists have experienced this situation: the explosion of knowledge and the proliferation of new data linked with technological innovation was at the roots, for instance, of the production of national indexes or national bibliographies, which are still the basic tools for synthesising the past.

Without delving too long into the epistemological questions prompted by the works of the *Annales*, what more than 50 years ago Braudel and his colleagues pointed out was the necessity of incorporating time with history and agency with environment, within the context of multiple temporalities. According to Guldi and Armitage, “by combining the procedure and aspirations of both the humanities and the social sciences, History has a special (if not unique) claim to be *a critical human science*” (2014, p. 15). The potential fragmentation of sources and narratives within the web further deconstructs the contraction of temporal horizons diagnosed, for instance, by intellectual historian D.T. Rodgers, who theorized a reconceptualization of political power in Western societies from the late 1980s onwards, culminating in a “foreshortened sense of time focused on one brief moment” and in the hegemony of the “here and now of the immediate present” (Rodgers, 2011, p. 255).

Web historiography is understandably recent, though a comprehensive literature on each web stratum has been already produced (for a comprehensive bibliography, see Brügger,

2009; Brügger, 2012). Looking at the M5S by focusing on the discursive construction of its political identity and ideology on the blog accentuates even more the necessity to mark again the distinction between ‘then’ and ‘now’ urged by the *Annales*. As the 13-year-old history of the blog is reconstructed, remarkable changes in the political and social history of Italy emerge; if web historiographer Niels Brügger pointed out in 2012 that because of its very short past the web might be not considered history, the historiography of the 5-star Movement’s blog shows that the web now has a history, and an important one.

At the same time, the fragility of digital sources, particularly web sources, is a growing concern. A new scholarship is emerging on the challenges posed by the web to the preservation and interpretation of the past, and on the importance and limits of web archives (Masanes, 2005; Dougherty and Schneider, 2011; Brügger, 2012). The Italian case is a particularly indicative example: the disruptive nature of the M5S’s digital amalgam powerfully interrogates what Armitage (2015) has recently underlined as “the public future of the past.” Traditionally, the study of the history of modern political parties in Italy and Europe can count on dedicated archives held in party-sponsored foundations, or special collections within State Archives. Because of their linking role between national-level government and society, the records produced by parties are recognised as having important public value, and even when there are no direct guidelines on the preservation of the historical heritage of these institutions, provisions have been made all over Europe, often by parties themselves (see Giuva, 2001; Voerman et al., 2002). Italy has particularly good sources in this regard, with several foundations dedicated to the preservation of parties’ historical archives. Furthermore, even marginal political forces have traditionally printed party newspapers, whose records are held in national and regional libraries. Records of congresses, minutes of assemblies, and newspapers where party members and sympathisers expressed their views on national and international affairs are therefore preserved across several archival institutions, even in the

lack of a dedicated party's archive. At the same time, however, Italy is lagging well behind other European countries in the creation of web archives. No Italian archive so far has made provisions for the collection and preservation of the Italian websphere, and the only source to interrogate the history of the Italian web remains the Internet Archives (Nanni, 2017). There are no projects comparable to the UK Web Archives, or to the web collections of the Dutch Documentation Centre of Political Parties. As communication moves online, this creates a series of problems for the long-term preservation of all parties' history. For example, when in 2013 the British Conservatives removed material from the party's website that did not conform to the political line anymore, the Internet Archive complied to the party's request of removal from its web archives; however, a copy of the lost pages remained available on the national UK web archives, independently managed by the British Library (see Schroeder and Brügger, 2017; Ramesh and Hern, 2013). If a similar case occurred in Italy, the material would be lost forever. Unlike traditional newspapers and other print material, that spread across different institutions, the Italian web archives currently only exist in the Internet Archive; against our notion of infinite reproducibility of digital artefacts, we can imagine the Italian web sources as unique copies that don't enjoy the protection of national heritage.

The no "non-digital" existence of the 5-Star Movement poses therefore new methodological challenges for historians of Italian politics. While web-only sources of other parties are limited, in the case of the M5S they represent the essence of the party. The blog is at the same time the official spokesperson, the press office, a document repository, and the party's newspaper. It is also the place where activists voted for their candidates at local, national, and European elections, until the introduction, in 2016, of the "Rousseau Platform," an independent website for certified voting (<https://rousseau.movimento5stelle.it/>). The other main pole of activities is the Meetup platform, where activists organise on a local level, using the platform as virtual local headquarters (Biorcio, 2015). Other elements of the Movement's

galaxy include www.la-cosa.it/, a platform for web streaming; several YouTube channels connected to Beppe Grillo or the Parliamentary group in the Senate and Lower Chamber; and the website www.movimento5stelle.it, which opened in 2009 as a first attempt to separate the Movement's web space from that of its founder, though it was for a long time just a section of www.beppegrillo.it. Prima facie, the online existence of the party provides unprecedented primary sources of study. With the exception the Rousseau Platform, whose content are accessible only to "certified members" (equivalent to party members), all other web content produced so far is currently freely available online: 13 years of daily blog posts, hundreds of thousands of comments, web pages, videos, and the minutes of the activities of every local meetup group over the years – plus social media engagement. At the same time, currently these sources depend entirely on the willingness of the Movement to keep them online. This "5-Star websphere" constitutes the only source to thoroughly study the M5S's political discourse: a problem made even more prominent by the habitual dislike of the Movement for external media, constantly accused of distorting the ideas and intentions of the M5S candidates and sympathizers - until recently, candidates were even forbidden to give interviews on TV or to newspapers, and only what is published on the blog can be considered representing the M5S as a whole rather than the individual opinion of a candidate (Bassi, 2013).

In order to reconstruct the 5-Star Movement's political discourse, this paper limited its focus on the blog posts, the official voice of the Movement as stated in their statute (Bassi, 2013). Up until January 2018, all posts were archived on www.beppegrillo.it thanks to the archive function typical of many blogs. At the end of the month though, in preparation for the general elections, www.beppegrillo.it was substituted by a new blog, www.ilblogdellestelle.it ("The Stars' blog"), to address one of the main criticisms against the M5S, often portrayed as a 'sect' in which Beppe Grillo played the role of the guru. www.beppegrillo.it remains online

as Grillo's personal blog, without an "archive" function; however, after two weeks of shutdown, the whole archive was migrated to the new blog, and is now accessible from the new site. [Www.movimento5stelle.it](http://www.movimento5stelle.it), which is now a separate website, does not have an archive function.

For this paper, firstly, all posts and documents related to the organisation of the Movement from 2005 until the end of 2017 were analysed, to reconstruct the evolution of the organisation of Italy's first web party. Secondly, from 2008 (when the Movement was officially established) till the end of 2017, all posts related to two key ideological issues in Italy, the European Union and migration, were searched through a series of keywords and analysed, reconstructing the M5S's positions on these topics. While conducting the research, the sources available on the "live" blog and those preserved in the Internet Archive were compared, testing the reliability of the sources held on the Stars' blog. The "live archive" contains a complete collection of all blog posts, and the daily continuity of archived material seems to suggest that there has been no deletion – the comparison with the Internet Archive material seems to confirm this, while the Wayback Machine presents an incomplete collection because not all blog posts were crawled. Similarly, at least for the posts used for this analysis, there were no content alterations compared to the snapshots on the Wayback Machine; overall, the M5S seems to be interested in preserving and granting access to its full archive. Still, the Internet Archive remains fundamental to access a series of information. First of all, during the migration from www.beppegrillo.it to www.ilblogdellestelle.it, only the text of the posts and (some) external links were preserved. The Wayback Machine, on the contrary, returns the complete blog page as it was when crawled, including pictures, banners, and external links. Secondly, the documents available on the blog and used over the years as the party's official documentation is still available for download only through the Internet Archive – as the next section illustrates, these are extremely important to understand the

functioning of the M5S. For this reason, when possible, the Internet Archive posts are referenced rather than the live blog.

Democracy and the blog: a brief history of the 5-Star Movement

The history of the 5-Star Movement blog can be divided in five phases, which correspond to the evolution of the Movement as a political actor. The blog is, in many ways, interconnected to the evolution of the political landscape in Italy, and provides an interesting viewpoint to retrace the tumultuous last decade of Italian politics. [Www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it) was registered in 2001 by friends of Beppe Grillo's (Giusberti, 2017). There is no trace of this early archaeology of the blog outside the Internet Archives, whose first instance opens with this message:

We are a small group of friends with an optimistic view of the world, for which every person is born free and has the right to pursue happiness. Any abuse of power, violence, or lie that prevents someone from realising this dream should provoke a firm and resolute action on part of everyone else. This portal is a place where we can get information, discuss, and organise ourselves to correct the injustices that cause suffering and deprivation to too many people.²

In concrete, the blog aims to be online network of non-profit associations in Italy, mostly from various left-wing, anti-Berlusconi (then Prime Minister), no-global movements. At the same time, the blog provides information on Beppe Grillo's tournée, and a few articles against globalisation. Beppe Grillo, one of the most popular Italian comedians, is not close to any political party, but is generically left-leaning in his satire, and sensitive to environmental

²Bububu.it (2001) "Chi siamo" Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20011216133126/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/chisiamo/default.asp> (Internet Archive, captured 16 December 2001).

and globalisation issues. Starting from the late 1990s, he has also been strongly against Berlusconi (Biorcio and Natale, 2013; Jacoboni 2017).

Phase 01 (2005-2007) – “Grillo’s friends”. The blog is completely rebooted, and effectively starts, in 2005, thanks to the Casaleggio Associati, a web services company founded by Gianroberto Casaleggio, a *sui generis* entrepreneur who advocates a digital revolution based on a networked direct democracy (Politi and Roberts, 2017). The occasion for the launch is the tournée for Grillo’s new show, titled “www.beppegrillo.it”. In the show, Grillo attacks Berlusconi’s government and the Italian financial and industrial elites. Most of the early posts are fast jokes extrapolated from the show, accompanied by information about various campaigns organised by anti-mafia, no-global, and environmentalist movements. In this first period, while Grillo advocates participation through the web, the blog remains effectively his personal space, and he uses the blog as a teaser for the topics he treats in his show – but because it is political satire, he also argues for political engagement on part of his fans. The posts are all written by Grillo, except for sporadic “guest appearances,” such as Noam Chomsky, and they are divided in seven topics: environment, economics, energy, politics, healthcare, digital technologies, transportations. One section of the blog, “The Wailing Wall”, is dedicated to subscribers’ comments. It collects first hundreds, then quickly thousands of contributions, varying from the denunciation of military expenses in Iraq to questions related to driving penalties.³ Many comments are simply compliments to Grillo and his show. Within this framework, Grillo invokes the end of bipolar politics as in left/right, to focus on the (global and national) North-South divide,⁴ expressing a generic anti-system

³ Beppegrillo.it (2005) Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20050130004654/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/archives/2005/01/il_muro_del_pia.html (Internet Archive, captured 30 January 2005).

⁴ “What is politics, does anyone still know? Does it still make sense to talk about left and right? Perhaps we should talk about above and below. North and South” translated from Beppegrillo.it (2005) “La politica scomparsa” [Politics disappeared] Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20050130035037/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/archives/muro_del_pianto/politica/index.html (Internet Archive, captured 30 January 2005).

message: society is decadent in all aspects; digital technologies, however, will unleash an environmental and democratic revolution.⁵ Already in 2005, Grillo's blog is one of the most famous in the world; many Anglo-American magazines consecrate Grillo's web presence by repeatedly ranking "www.beppegrillo.it" among the top 10 world-wide, a particularly impressive result for a website in Italian. For his web-activism, Grillo is nominated person of the year by the *New York Times* (La Repubblica, 2005). One of the reasons for Grillo's popularity is the early denunciation of what would become major European scandals, such as the bankruptcy of the food factory Parmalat (World Finance, 2011) and the crisis of the Monte dei Paschi bank (Dixon, 2013).

Drawing from various pre-existing protest movements throughout Italy, many activist networks receive Grillo's invitation and gather around the Meetup platform, calling themselves "Gli amici di Grillo", Grillo's friends. The comedian describes the blog as an "instrument at our disposal to realize true democracy."⁶ From November 2005, a banner on the homepage links to "Grillo's friends" meetups list (for which unfortunately it is not possible to retrieve an archived version to understand how many existed in 2005). As 2005 is the last year of Berlusconi's controversial government, in this first phase Grillo attracts a galaxy coming from left-wing protesters, united under the common banner of "anti-Berlusconism" and criticism to globalisation. Special attention is also given to police violence, denouncing episodes of police brutality during protests, such as the notorious G-8 in Genoa in 2001. Sporadically, the blog also hosts articles on development in the Global South, particularly Latin America. While the attacks go to the whole political class, Grillo hosts

⁵ "The Network is our way out. Politicians [Urbani] are targeting us" translated from Beppegrillo.it (2005) "La rete ci salverà [The net will save us] Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20050130042239/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/archives/muro_del_pianto/tecnologie/index.html (Internet Archive, captured 30 January 2005).

⁶ Beppegrillo.it (2006) Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20060203051844/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/primarie_dei_cittadini/index.html (Internet Archive, captured 02 March 2006).

several politicians from smaller left-wing parties, such as Fausto Bertinotti, Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio, and Luigi De Magistris, a magistrate turned politician that had supervised several mafia trials, some of them involving Berlusconi. The latter is officially invested by Grillo as the right candidate to vote in the 2009 European elections. Apart from these few exceptions, however, the two main *leitmotifs* of the blog are already present: firstly, politicians are nothing but “employees” of the people, and they should be paid only to do what citizens tell them to. Secondly, these orders can be given by people directly through online voting, deciding what their “employees” in the Parliaments or city councils should enact.⁷ The first of these programmatic actions is launched in January 2006: Grillo posts the “programme,” a series of suggestions on renewables, recycling, and consumption reduction. For every topic (energy, transports, development of web-based infrastructures) the citizens (that is, the blog subscribers) can contribute by commenting under the posts.⁸ This procedure, based on a top-down approach of ready-made programmes to which people are called to comment on, is still the one enacted by the Movement today, through the more articulated Rousseau platform.

These first primaries are the basis for a document delivered in person by Grillo to Romano Prodi, the Prime Minister in a short-lived parenthesis between Berlusconi’s two mandates (2001-2006 and 2008-2011). Always from the blog, Grillo launches the campaign “Onorevoli [MPs, nda] wanted”, which advocate the prohibition for people with a criminal conviction to run for elections, and a limit of political mandates to two Parliamentary terms. The campaign collects 350000 signatures for a citizens-proposed law,⁹ envisaged by the Italian Constitution. To collect the signatures, on the 8th September 2007 (the day of commemoration of the

⁷ See for example Beppegrillo.it (2005) Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20050920162915/http://beppegrillo.it:80/> (Internet Archive, captured 20 September 2005)

⁸ Beppegrillo.it (2006) Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20060203051844/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/primarie_dei_cittadini/index.html (Internet Archive, captured 02 March 2006).

⁹ Beppegrillo.it (2007) Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20071003221803/http://151.1.253.1/vaffanculoday/> (Internet Archive, captured 03 October 2007).

armistice during World War II), Grillo and the meetups organise a mass protest, called the V-Day, “Vaffanculo [fuck off, nda] Day”. The protest is very successful, with millions of people participating. At the same time, Grillo announces that he has consulted several lawyers to understand how “independent lists” works, and he launches the first electoral campaign of the blog, for the upcoming local elections of 2008.¹⁰ Any citizen can form an independent list and run for the local election with the list name “Amici di Grillo.” As long as no one in the list is a member of a political party and has criminal convictions, s/he can obtain the blog “certification” that allows him or her to use the blog’s name. If certified, the list will be required to open a web space to communicate with the community it represents; furthermore, it will not be able to ally with any non-certified lists.¹¹ The “certification” is obtained by sending a copy of criminal records and IDs to the blog, via email. “The blog,” the instruction says, reserves the right to revoke the certification if evidence of misconduct is found.¹² While using the expression “the blog” gives the sense of a community gathering around www.beppegrillo.it, ultimately it is Beppe Grillo only who has the legal rights on the usage of the logo, which is registered as trademark under his name (Bassi, 2013). Furthermore, the candidates from the various lists do not know each other, there are no events listed to meet and discuss a common platform: the only common point is the “certification” provided by the blog.

¹⁰ Beppegrillo.it (2008) Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20081210124629/http://www2.beppegrillo.it:80/listeciviche/> (Internet Archive, captured 10 December 2008).

¹¹ Beppegrillo.it (2007) Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20071014060346/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/> (Internet Archive, captured 14 Oct 2007).

¹² Beppegrillo.it (2007) Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20081208160915/http://www2.beppegrillo.it:80/listeciviche/certifica.php> (Internet Archive, captured 08 Dec 2008). The lists can be found here: Beppegrillo.it (2009) Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20090427102300/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/listeciviche/citta/> (Internet Archive, captured 27 Apr 2009)

The electoral lists “Amici di Beppe Grillo” debut in the local elections of 2008, gathering about 2% of the votes; meanwhile, Berlusconi comes back to power after the fall of Prodi’s government.

Phase 02 (2008-2010) – the establishment of the 5-Star Movement With the descent into the political arena, the blog enters a new phase. In July 2009, Beppe Grillo applies to become a member of the Democratic Party (PD) and run for the party’s primaries that will determine the candidate premier to the next elections. The secretariat of the PD refuses, on the ground that Grillo represents values that are not compatible with party.¹³ Grillo uses this episode as proof that the Democratic Party is not an opposition party, but has the same agenda as Berlusconi and it is scared of the blog’s ideas.¹⁴ Throughout the year, the blog dedicates a significant number of posts to the creation of an electoral “pro-blog” programme, which revolves around the key points of the blog posts, including renewable energy, “digital citizenship,” the reinforcement of workers’ rights.¹⁵ On the 4th October, the representatives of the independent lists and of the meetups organise an event at the Smeraldo Theatre in Milan, to announce the establishment of the 5-Star Movement.¹⁶ The blog opens a section dedicated to the Movimento, and publishes its Statute, or better non-Statue, which proclaims that

The 5-Star Movement is a non-association. It represents a platform and a tool for debate and consultation that has its centre in the blog www.beppegrillo.it. The “headquarters” of the 5-Star Movement coincides with the web address

¹³ Beppegrillo.it (2009) “Comitato di garanzia del PDmenoelle” [The One Party Committee] Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20090717221101/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/> (Internet Archive, captured 17 July 2009).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ The programme is available at: Beppegrillo.it (2009) <https://web.archive.org/web/20091122045342/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/iniziativa/movimentocinqustelle/Programma-Movimento-5-Stelle.pdf> (Internet Archive, captured 22 November 2009)

¹⁶ Beppegrillo.it (2009) Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20091008105134/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/iniziativa/movimentocinqustelle/index.php> (Internet Archive, captured 10 August 2009).

www.beppegrillo.it. Contacts with the Movement can happen exclusively through electronic mail through the address MoVimento5stelle@beppegrillo.it¹⁷

The non-statute also explains that the Movement draws from the experience of the blog, the meetups, and the protests organised in the past four years; that it is not a party and never will be; and that has the objective of realising democratic participation without the mediation of elective representative bodies such as parties. All web users should be recognised the right to govern, a role traditionally reserved to few elected politicians. The requirements for being a member of the Movement are equated to the “registration to a normal website”, with the further caveat that subscribers cannot be enrolled at the same time in any political party. Finally, candidates for the elections will be chosen through the blog amongst subscribers.¹⁸ Now that the 5-Star Movement exists as its own political force (though legally it remains a trademark owned by Beppe Grillo), the attacks against the political establishment are intensified, pushing the sentiment of Us VS them, rather than Left V Right (or the initially declared North V South) that become the main characteristic of the blog. The first elections in which the 5-Star Movement symbol appears are the 2010 regional and local elections. Overall the results are modest, 1.7% on the average; still, the Movement elects its first regional councillors.¹⁹ From the blog, Grillo reiterates that the Movement is “neither to the Left, nor to the Right, just forward looking.”²⁰ According to the data provided by the blog, the M5S can now count on 60,000 members - i.e., blog subscribers.²¹ In this second phase, the blog

¹⁷ Document available at: [Beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it) (2009) Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20091228213156/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/iniziativa/movimentocinqustelle/Regolamento-Movimento-5-Stelle.pdf> (Internet Archive, captured 28 December 2009).

¹⁸*Id.*

¹⁹ Ministry of the Interior (2010) Available at <http://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=R&dtel=28/03/2010&tpa=I&tpe=A&lev0=0&levsut0=0&es0=S&ms=N> (Accessed 10 February 2017)

²⁰ [Beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it) (2010) Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20100330174441/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/2010/03> (Internet Archive, captured 30 March 2010).

²¹ [Beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it) (2010) “L’inizio di un percorso” [A new direction] Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20100330174430/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/> (Internet Archive, captured 30 March 2010).

maintains the same structure: posts are almost exclusively by Beppe Grillo, and the banners on the homepage mix the sales of his merchandise and show tickets with the Movement's campaign, from the "Onorevoli wanted" to the promotion of freedom of information via digital technologies. The main innovation is that users can now vote for the comments, and the most voted is re-published as a post. One of the most-voted comment welcomes new users to the blog and explains its dynamics:

Here you can find the true essence of grassroots democracy, in the beginning it looks like complete chaos but it's a place where everyone can express his opinions, and everyone can reply or rebut what you said. The topic of the day should always be the post [by Beppe Grillo, nda], but [because] we live in a democratic emergency, especially with regards to freedom of information...as you have probably noticed, they [the politicians] are all keeping away from the blog and from the web, because on the web if you say something stupid or you lie, you are immediately exposed and destroyed, in real time, and this is what grassroots democracy is²²

Phase 03 (2010-2013) – towards national electoral success With the fall of Berlusconi's government and the arrival of former European Commissioner Mario Monti as Prime Minister, the blog enters yet a new phase. Berlusconi and his ministers, up until now the main objective of the blog's spite, disappear. The enemy is not much Monti, criticised but depicted as a puppet, but by Pierluigi Bersani, the leader of a Democratic Party who supports Monti's government, and who is depicted as the carbon copy of Berlusconi.²³ In the political,

²² Beppegrillo.it (2010) "Il mercato di Kalkutta" [Kalkutta's market] Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20100523181753/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/2010/05/il_mercato_di_k.html (Internet Archive, captured 25 May 2010).

²³ "The only ones who don't want Monti are the Italians. In order to force him in, they all merged into One Party [...] You can vote for whoever you want, with full freedom, but there winner is always the same, declined in different shades of grey" Adapted and translated from Beppegrillo.it (2012) "Cinquanta Sfumature di Grigio" [50 shades of grey] Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20121218013419/http://www.beppegrillo.it/> (Internet Archive, captured 18 December 2012)

economic, and institutional crisis that Italy lives in the 2011-13 period, Grillo's accusations pay off. In 2012 the Movement wins the first major city, Parmalat-scandal hit Parma, with the election of Federico Pizzarotti, the "mayor-spokesperson paid by the citizens to follow the directives of the blog."²⁴ The M5S also imposes itself as the third political force in the Sicilian elections for the regional Parliament. Throughout the year, the Movement prepares for the upcoming national elections: the "neither left nor right" messages intensify, and so do the attacks against all political parties and media outside the blog.²⁵ In particular, Grillo attacks anyone who tries to interpret the M5S as either a left-wing or right-wing force, or who compares the Movement to a political party.²⁶

The programme for the national elections is created on the blog in the same way as before: Beppe Grillo writes it on a series of posts divided by topic, to which the subscribers can comment. Just as in 2006, there are minimal differences between the programme as proposed by Grillo in the posts and the final draft. The requirements for the candidates are the same as the previous local elections, but this time each candidate is given space on the "Movimento" section of the blog and a video on the Movement's YouTube channel to present him/herself and his/her programme. The blog subscribers who can vote online are, at this stage, 95,000; a new requirement is introduced that only people who subscribed to the blog before September (three months before the online voting), and who certify their identity by submitting their ID to the blog, can vote.²⁷ The results nominate 1400 candidates throughout Italy; the exact

²⁴ Beppegrillo.it (2012) "Parma: hanno vinto I cittadini [Parma: the citizens won] Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120525093205/http://www.beppegrillo.it/> (Internet Archive, captured 25 May 2012).

²⁵ See for example "Direttori in mutande" [Editor in their underwear] where Grillo invites his followers to find embarrassing pictures of the editors of the national newspapers "La Repubblica" and "Corriere". Beppegrillo.it (2012) Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20120713004024/http://www.beppegrillo.it/> (Captured 13 July 2012)

²⁶ See for example "Stalker Politici" [Political Stalkers] where Grillo accuses political parties to ask him for an alliance without understanding that "Beppe Grillo and the Movimento 5 Stelle have a monogamous relation with the people, and there are loyal to them. Beppegrillo.it (2010) Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20101003200031/http://www.beppegrillo.it/> (Internet Archive, captured 03 October 2010)

²⁷ Beppegrillo.it (2012) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2012/12/i_risultati_delle_parlamentarie.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 06 December).

results of the vote have not been saved by the Internet Archives,²⁸ but it is worth noticing that the average is 68 votes per candidate.

While the Movement insists that they are not a party, a “Movimento 5 Stelle” is registered in Genoa as a no-profit association for the promotion of direct democracy and social development through the blog “www.beppegrillo.it,” in which the board is responsible for overseeing, generically, the “technical-bureaucratic aspects” of translating blog policies into the political scene. The establishment of this association is not declared anywhere on the blog; in April 2013, a scoop by the Huffington Post reveals the association’s statute and the composition of the board: Beppe Grillo, his nephew, and his accountant (Bassi, 2013). Interestingly, no one from the Casaleggio Associati, which manages the blog, appears officially in the statute; still, with the establishment of the association, the Movement can now be defined as a party. The blog does not reply to this leak.

In February 2013, the 5-Star Movement booms at the elections. They impose themselves as the third political force on a national level, with 8.7 million votes.²⁹ While they conducted a very passionate campaign during the elections, preparing an electoral programme with the usual modalities of commenting on the blog and choosing their candidates MPs online, the sudden success catches them unprepared. Up until now, the only M5S activist who wrote on the blog was Alessandro Di Battista, an “expert on Latin America” who wrote a post in July 2012 about a book he wrote on the 5-Star Movement.³⁰ The newly-elected MPs are unknown figures for the activists themselves, and many don’t have any previous experience in politics; they are students, unemployed, factory workers, self-employed, professionals from various

²⁸ Beppegrillo.it (2012) Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20121217093818/https://www.beppegrillo.it/votazioni/candidati/elenco_circoscrizioni.php (Internet Archive, captured 12 December 2012).

²⁹ Ministry of the Interior. Elezioni Politiche 2013. Available at: <http://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=C&dtel=24/02/2013&tpa=I&tpe=A&lev0=0&levsut0=0&es0=S&ms=S> (Accessed 18 February 2018).

³⁰ Beppegrillo.it (2012) “I nuovi colonialisti” [The new colonialists] Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120727204149/http://www.beppegrillo.it/> (Internet Archive, captured 27 July 2012)

fields.³¹ “We take note that the people will enter in the Parliament for the first time in history – is the blog-comment of an activist – until now, the people delegated to the MPs who delegated to the governments who delegated to organised crime.”³²

The Parliamentary term starts, however, with friction within the Movement. The Democratic Party, which arrived first with only a handful of votes more than Berlusconi’s party, tries to ask the 5-Star Movement to form a coalition government. To some, this does not seem unreasonable. So far, because of the strong anti-Berlusconi agenda, the Movement has been mostly perceived as a left-wing protest movement, more intransigent but not completely opposite to the instances of the Democratic Party.³³ Grillo however, in his quality of “general spokesperson and guarantor,” closes the door to accords with any political force. He does not even call for a vote on the blog with regards to the subject, with the justification that the non-statute forbids alliances – though as a matter of fact there is no explicit clause on this.³⁴ Eventually, a new government is formed by Enrico Letta as a coalition between former Berlusconi’s allies and the Democratic Party. For the first time, the Italian Parliament is characterised by a “tripolar” rather than bipolar asset.

Phase 04 (2013 -2017) – An established mass protest party. With the 2013 elections, the blog enters in its fourth phase. The language and the graphic change slightly, trying to become more institutional and less crafted around Grillo’s colourful language. Apart from the most voted comment and several guest writers, the blog opens to posts by its elected representatives: for example, the “M5S Camera [Lower Chamber, nda]” and the “M5S Senato

³¹ For a full list of candidates: Beppegrillo.it (2012) Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20121217093818/https://www.beppegrillo.it/votazioni/candidati/elenco_circoscrizioni.php (Internet Archive, captured 17 December 2012).

³² Beppegrillo.it (2013) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/02/il_parlamento_d.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 26 February).

³³ The programme is available for download at Beppegrillo.it (2012) <https://web.archive.org/web/20121004105255/http://www.beppegrillo.it/iniziative/movimentocinquestelle/Programma-Movimento-5-Stelle.pdf> (Internet Archive, captured 04 October 2012)

³⁴ Beppegrillo.it (2013) “Il mercato delle vacche” [Free for all] Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20130302012512/http://www.beppegrillo.it/> (Internet Archive, capture 02 March 2013)

[Senate, nda].” This search for institutional legitimacy is accompanied by a further “centralisation” of communication. Candidates are strictly forbidden from going on TV, for fear that they would express opinions that are not representative of the official line. The first expulsions start, such as that of MP Adele Gambaro, guilty of releasing an interview in which she criticises Grillo’s aggressive tones on the blog.³⁵ Her expulsion is voted by the blog; however, no posts are given by the MP to counteract Grillo’s request for her expulsion.³⁶

The political debate focuses as much as possible on “neutral” topics such as the introduction of basic income, help to SMEs, investments against unemployment (at a time when the PD fully supports the austerity politics started with Monti). At the same time, the left-leaning flare of the blog is abandoned in favour of the populist right-wing. If during the Berlusconi years the Movement was perceived as “leftist” because of the attacks against the Premier and his right-wing political class, the arrival of the Democratic Party to power causes an equally strong protest reaction towards the populist right-wing.

Pundits like economist Eugenio Benetazzo, close to the neofascist association “Casapound,” or Diego Fusaro, an Eurosceptic philosophy lecturer and against LGBT rights, become familiar figures of the blog. The extra-European topics against military interventions and pro-development in the Global South disappear, replaced by, for example, the defence of commercial borders to protect local agricultural products against competition from Africa.³⁷ Extra-European affairs overall disappear, though in November 2016 Grillo applauds the victory of Trump, hailed as a general “Vaffanculo” to the “big” newspapers, intellectual,

³⁵ Beppegrillo.it (2013) “Quando uno vale niente” [One equals zero] Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20130612194923/http://www.beppegrillo.it/> (Internet Archive, captured 12 June 2013)

³⁶ Beppegrillo.it (2013) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/06/voto_espulsione.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 19 June)

³⁷ See for example the row other Tunisian oil: Beppegrillo.it (2013) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/03/gli_esperti_e_1.html. (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 01 March)

journalists, the establishment in general that is still anchored to “a world that does not exist anymore.”³⁸

In 2014, the European elections are again organised exclusively online. The programme, always created according to the post-comment strategy, has a referendum on the permanence of Italy in the Eurozone as its main point.³⁹ The Movement collects five million votes, three less than the previous elections; still, the 5-Star Movement imposes itself as the second Italian party, overtaking Berlusconi’s coalition by a landslide. The rules adopted at a national level are translated in the European Parliament: “the guarantor [Grillo] proposes; the web expresses its will; the spokespersons [the MEPs] put into practice the decisions made by the people through the blog.”⁴⁰

After the European elections, the blog intensifies further its attacks against the establishment, both on a national and European level. Matteo Renzi, the new Prime Minister from the Democratic Party, becomes the centre of the attacks. In general, the first Parliamentary experience of the 5-Star Movement is characterised by the constant effort to appear neutral against all other political forces: Us, the citizens, on the right side, against Them, the establishment, who is responsible for the crisis.

In 2016, the Movement wins the elections in two of the most important Italian cities, Turin and Rome, the Capital city: the first major governance test before the 2018 elections.

Particularly in Turin, the vote distribution shows an entirely “Us V Them” trajectory rather

³⁸ Beppegrillo.it (2016) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2016/11/il_vaffanculo_dil_vaffanculo_di_trump.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 09 November)

³⁹ Programme on download at Beppegrillo.it (2014) Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140331113216/https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/materiali-bg/7punti.pdf> (Internet Archive, captured 31 March 2014)

⁴⁰ Beppegrillo.it (2017) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2017/01/risposta_alle_domande_frequenti_sul_movimento_5_stelle_in_europa.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 20 January)

than an ideological one: richer neighbourhoods vote *en mass* for the candidate of the Democratic Party, while the poorer areas turn equally compacted to the M5S.⁴¹

An important element of novelty in preparation to the next election is the launch, at the end of 2016, of the Rousseau voting platform, a website created and managed by the Casaleggio Associati to allow citizens to propose new laws and to vote on what the Movements “spokespersons” in the Parliament should do. Always in preparation to the elections of March 2018, throughout 2017, Grillo’s posts diminished in favour of other representatives of the party, particularly Luigi Di Maio MP, the Vice President of the Chamber of Deputies.

Phase 05 (2017 - present) – the 2018 elections. In 2017, in preparation to the second national elections to which the M5S participates, the structure of the party is profoundly reorganised. The non-statute is replaced by a statute to all effects. The control over the logo, the Rousseau Platform, and the blog, rather than to Beppe Grillo alone, now goes to a new “5-Star Movement Association” that replaces the 2012 body and envisages the election of the guarantor, but only from 2021, after Grillo’s “renewed” 4-year mandate.⁴² The new statute envisages the elections, through the Rousseau Platform, of a “Political Head of the Movement” which will also be the candidate to Premiership. It is unclear how the candidates to run for this role were chosen, but they were all unknown figures apart from Di Maio, who indeed won with 83% of the votes. Interestingly, the blog does not provide the numbers of the elections; according to the financial newspaper “Il Sole 24 Ore” (never disproved) they are very low: 37,442 votes (against over 130,000 blog subscribers), of which 31,000 for Di Maio (Perrone, 2017). In January 2018, the Rousseau platform was used again for the “Parliamentaries”, the selection of the electoral lists for the MPs, again with a low turnout,

⁴¹ Citta di Torino (2016) Risultati Elettorali. Available at <http://www.comune.torino.it/elezioni/2016/amministrative/ballottaggio/citta/> (accessed 10 February 2017)

⁴² Available on Il Blog delle Stelle (2017) https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/associazionerousseau/documenti/statuto_MoVimento_2017.pdf (Accessed 10 February 2017)

38,000, and no candidate reaching 1000 preferences.⁴³ The platform also attracted a major scandal: it was hacked on the eve of the vote, and the data of the subscribers were stolen (Jones and Cinelli, 2017). Apart from the damage to the M5S' activists, the event showed the breaches in security of a system that, in the intention of its designers, is supposed to complement and eventually replace the Parliament, and to become the digital pulsing heart of future democracies.

Another fundamental novelty of the new statute is that it allows alliances with other political forces, opening the way to the participation of the M5S to coalition governments, almost mandatory in the Italian electoral system. Finally, in January 2018, www.beppegrillo.it has been replaced by the new www.movimento5stelle.it, which is also managed by the Rousseau Association. The new blog now only sells official M5S merchandise, and the posts are mostly written by Di Maio, who as “Political Head” has replaced Beppe Grillo also as “spokesperson.” The new association conforms to the characteristics of a traditional party, though everything continues to happen online, through the blog and the Rousseau platform.

This excursus on the history of the Movement so far shows that the online-only life of the party has not favoured a more democratic approach to politics compared to traditional parties. On the contrary, the blog was always characterised by a strong top-down approach. The blog posts, the only official voice of the Movement as declared in the party's statutes, were almost always written by Beppe Grillo, without any indication of a specific editorial policy. The “most voted comment,” at least of those analysed in the 13-year span, was never in contradiction with what stated by the guarantor. With regards to online voting, activists were called to express their opinions only when Grillo decided to do so, and so far online voting has shown a simple consultative character, more similar to an opinion poll than to grassroots

⁴³ Il Blog delle Stelle (2018) “Risultati Parlamentarie 2018” Available at: https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/associazionerousseau/documenti/risultati_parlamentarie.pdf (Accessed 10 February 2017)

democracy. Online voting has never been organised on a local government level, and the lack of precise rules governing the candidates' selections have allowed Grillo, as guarantor, to decide on the usage of the 5-Star Movement symbol – that is, who can be a candidate - at his discretion. Finally, the differences between the activist participating to online elections (in the order of thousands) and the votes collected during general elections (in the order of millions) show not only a general disinterest in participating to new forms of online democracy, but a general sense of delegation to the self-proclaimed party elites, represented by Grillo and Casaleggio, who were able to implement full control over the ideas and the candidates expressed by the party without opening real spaces of public debate.

Neither-Nor: the principles of the 5-Star Movement

As the previous sections has shown, the 5-Star Movement was able to emerge as the “perfect” protest movement, with a transversal catching area of protest vote spanning across a disappointed electorate from all political backgrounds. To maintain its neutrality, the Movement has adopted ambiguous, convoluted positions on several topics that are “ideologically charged,” particularly with regards to migration and to the Italian position in the European Union. To try and read the Movement's ideology, the posts published on the blog on these two topics were analysed.

Migration. In the first phase of the blog, until 2007, Grillo denounced the racist outlook of Berlusconi's government, and the law that introduced the crime of illegal immigration. The blog also expressed sympathy for issues of international development, neo-colonialism, and exploitation; however, particularly after the burst of the economic crisis in 2010, the left has been criticised for adopting a “do-gooding useless rhetoric” in treating the national

“emergency” of migration.⁴⁴ In January 2014, Grillo called for the first and last online voting on the subject matter: whether the MPs should vote to abolish the law on illegal immigration. Two third of the subscribers vote to eliminate it.⁴⁵ Still, against a left-wing discourse, the M5S always refused to consider migrants as a resource, preferring the narrative that migration only worsens unemployment, wages and working conditions, and it is one of the causes of the new wave of Italian migration abroad.⁴⁶ In 2010, when migrants working in neo-slavery conditions in the tomatoes fields of Southern Italy started a revolt, the blog’s sympathies went to the Italian workers who remained unemployed:

Why are there ten thousand illegal immigrants in Southern farmlands? Obviously, they bring wealth to those who exploit them [...] The ready and blind answer of the third-worldist morons is always the same: “they are here because they do the jobs that the Italians don’t want to do anymore!” On the contrary: pay the Italians a decent salary, and there will be a long line of Italians willing to take their places.⁴⁷

The solution is not to regularise the migrants present on the territory, but to reduce (and possibly to stop) the arrivals.⁴⁸ When the Arab spring started, the early sentiments of admiration for people igniting a revolution (“which Italians should imitate”) ⁴⁹ are soon

⁴⁴ “The PD is all “do-goody” against the poorest parts of the population who live in direct contacts with the immigrants and with which they have to compete for the few resources available” Adapted and translated from Beppegrillo.it (2010) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2010/01/gli_spartacus_neri_di_rosarno.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 08 January)

⁴⁵ Beppegrillo.it (2014) Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20140117232759/http://www.beppegrillo.it/2014/01/risultati_della_votazione_sul_r_eato_di_clandestinita.html (Internet Archive, captured 17 January 2014)

⁴⁶ “The new decree will allow 150000 units to enter the country. In order to implement this, it is necessary that 150000 Italians, possibly young and highly educated, will leave to make space” Translated from Beppegrillo.it (2011) “I nuovi emigranti” [The new migrants] Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20110125003723/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/> (Internet Archive, captured 25 January 2011)

⁴⁷ Beppegrillo.it (2010) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2010/01/gli_spartacus_neri_di_rosarno.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 08 January).

⁴⁸ The flyer for the 2018 general elections showed a clear sea line with the slogan: “Target: zero landing. Italy is not Europe’s refugee camp”. Available at: [5stelleCagliari \(2015\)](https://www.cagliari5stelle.it/PNM5S/volantino_Immigrazione.pdf) https://www.cagliari5stelle.it/PNM5S/volantino_Immigrazione.pdf (Accessed 03 March 2018)

⁴⁹ Beppegrillo.it (2011) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2011/01/perche_non_dormi_fratello.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 15 January)

replaced by the sense of emergency for the increased landings on the Southern shores. While there is human sympathy for people escaping from wars and poverty, Italy should not host them or give them precedence over the problems of Italians.⁵⁰ Overall, the migrant crisis is mostly mentioned as a tool to attack the actions of the governments, always indicated as the main responsible for immigration, particularly because of the adoption of the Dublin Regulation; at the same time, all fears related to migration are boosted uncritically, from immigrants stealing Italian jobs and resources to crime rates to the spread of diseases. In summary, the position of the 5-Star Movement on migrants is similar to the radical right-wing Northern League, minus the open racist slurs.⁵¹

Europe and the euro. While in the case of migration the line of the M5S is more consistent, though overall mild, with regards to the European Union and the Eurozone in particular the ambiguity of the 5-Star Movement reaches its peak. In a first phase, until 2011, Europe is the saviour against Berlusconi's incipient disaster. The main points in the economic programme are related to the absolute need to reduce public debt, and Grillo repeatedly pleads Merkel to invade the country to free the citizens from Berlusconi. The EU is always the good example to follow in all areas, from the environment to freedom of information, to technological advance. At the beginning of the sovereign debt crisis, Grillo warns against the public debt and that Italy might end up like Greece; he praises Merkel and Brussels for the firm action against the "spendthrift" Greek government.⁵² After the fall of Berlusconi's government however, and the austerity measures passed by Monti, the blog's view becomes more

⁵⁰ See programme for the 2018 elections, available at Il Blog Delle Stelle (2017) http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2017/07/il_programmainmigrazione_del_movimento_5_stelle_obiettivo_sbarchi_zero.html (Accessed 20 February 2018)

⁵¹ For example, see the "Conversation between a racist and an anti-racist," in which a person self-defining as racist lists the emergencies brought about by ; while the person self-defining as anti-racist simply refuses to discuss the problems related to migration. In Beppegrillo.it (2015) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2015/06/conversazione_tra_un_razzista_e_un_non_so.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 09 June)

⁵² Beppegrillo.it (2010) "Merkel for President" Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20100523033658/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/> (Internet Archive, captured 23 May 2010)

convoluted. In the summer of 2011, the blog launches a poll on the reasons for the economic crisis; the majority of subscribers indicate the common currency.⁵³ However, Grillo does not espouse immediately an anti-euro agenda: all the way until the summer of 2014, posts oscillate from unconditional praise for Merkel⁵⁴ to accusing the whole of Northern Europe of sucking up the blood of the Mediterranean bloc,⁵⁵ from solidarity towards the Greek people, to lauding the German refusal to pay for other peoples' debts,⁵⁶ from the creation of the Eurobonds, to leave the EU altogether.⁵⁷ The "Europe of the people, not of the banks"⁵⁸ approach (typical of the left) is accompanied by the need "never to give up sovereign power"⁵⁹ (the nationalist right-wing approach). It is important to stress that rather than a sign of debating, this seems on the contrary a desire for maintaining ambiguity over the matter. The *trait d'union* of these very different views is a generic message that politicians should obey to the desire of the people, whether this is the refusal of anti-austerity measures in Greece and Italy, or the German opposition to the eurobonds. In February 2014, the first point in the programme for the European elections is the call for a referendum on the euro, to let the citizens decide, without giving indications on the direction of the vote. Only from May 2014, after the elections, the blog becomes clearly anti-euro, and starts to adopt an anti-European language. In the European Parliament, the Movement allies with Nigel Farage's UKIP, the

⁵³ Beppegrillo.it (2011) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2011/08/la_manovra_economica_dei_cittadini.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 19 August)

⁵⁴ Beppegrillo.it (2012) Available at http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2012/06/i_tedeschi_non.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 29 June)

⁵⁵ Beppegrillo.it (2011) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2011/10/euro_mission_impossible.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 30 October)

⁵⁶ Beppegrillo.it (2012) "Com'è cattiva la Merkel" [How evil, Merkel] Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120802063813/http://www.beppegrillo.it/> (Internet Archive, captured 02 August 2012)

⁵⁷ Beppegrillo.it (2013) "Non possiamo morire per Berlino" [We can't die for Berlin] Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20130714201447/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/> (Internet Archive, accessed 14 August 2013)

⁵⁸ Beppegrillo.it (2011) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2011/12/la_dipendente_statale_greca.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 27 December)

⁵⁹ Beppegrillo.it (2012) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2012/03/italia_senza_so.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 29 March)

British anti-EU party. While the alliance is presented to the outside as purely “strategic,” on the blog Farage is praised by Grillo repeatedly for his pro-sovereignty stances against Brussels.⁶⁰ The Movement also praises Brexit, while continuing the campaign for a referendum on the euro, now suggesting to vote against the eurozone.

Later, from 2015, nationalist and anti-austerity feelings are diluted in a more generic anti-system message. Interestingly also, amid all the attacks, the EU is still invoked as a guiding light whenever Brussels criticises the Italian government. Finally, at the beginning of 2017, there is a new u-turn, when the M5S MEPs try to join the ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) for a new European alliance, in spite of ALDE espousing those neoliberal economics policies and further European integration that the blog relentlessly attacked in the previous years.⁶¹ The negotiations fail; but as the economic conditions of Italy show a slight improvement, references to the referendum on the eurozone fade. Finally, in September 2017, the newly-elected Head of the Movement Luigi Di Maio proclaimed that leaving the euro is not an issue for the foreseeable future.

Overall, the analysis of the discourses on migration and on the European Union seems to suggest that in both cases, while trying to maintain a language that can find consensus both amongst the left-leaning and right-wing spectrum of its electorate, the M5S has more in common with right-wing nationalism than with the left. The ambiguity in the language is expressed, in the case of migration, by never espousing clear policies on the issues, but simply attacking the “do-goodies” for not tackling the interests of the Italian population. In the case of the EU, the ambiguity is expressed by frequent u-turns; but in this case, too, the

⁶⁰ Beppegrillo.it (2014) “Nigel Farage, la Verita” [Nigel Farage, the truth] Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20140531030643/http://www.beppegrillo.it/> (Internet Archive, captured 31 May 2014)

⁶¹ Beppegrillo.it (2017) Available at: http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2017/01/il_movimento_5_stelle_in_europa_per_litalia.html (Il Blog delle Stelle Archive, 10 January)

claim for the need of sovereignty on part of the Italian people expresses a closer adherence to right-wing populism across Europe, particularly with Farage's UKIP.

Conclusions

This long excursus inside www.beppegrillo.it allows for interesting observations about the possibility of direct democracy online, and its links with the nature of the M5S's populism. While an analysis of the relations between web technologies and the rise of populism is well outside the scope of this paper, it is interesting to notice that in the case of the M5S, the party's "ideological use of the web" of advocating direct ruling on part of the citizens, limiting the role of the political class to spokespersons, seems to favour the opposite. Rather than a tool for direct participation to governance, the blog has a strong top-down approach, in which the agenda is dictated by the leader (or "guarantor"), and the occasions for the people to decide directly are inexistent: posts are mostly written by Beppe Grillo (and now Di Maio), and so far the differences between the final programmes and the versions posted for comments on the blog have been irrelevant - a sign that comments don't really influence the drafting. So far, none of the relevant positions in the party structure, starting with the guarantor, have been elective, and party members, the "certified subscribers," are simply called to like or unlike the proposals managed by this self-appointed elite. The recent creation of a Statute similar to traditional parties has established more open governing rules. However, online voting is not clearly regulated, and the Rousseau Platform has proved for now to be not only far from realising direct democracy, but potentially detrimental – because of the technical fallacies that could easily cause vote manipulation, and for the lack of transparency of its structure, a proprietary software created by the Casaleggio Associati. Furthermore,

while the platform is being tested to become an instrument of governance at a national level, in city councils none of the 5-Star majors has envisaged online voting.

As a politician, Grillo stepped into the representative's vacuum of Italy's social crisis, operating as a conventional 'anti-political' political actor. In this process, what should have been the instrument for empowering *the people* – the web – acted, on the contrary, as a centraliser of ideas and actions imposed by a small group. The use of the web has allowed the M5S to amalgamate old political practices with new strategies, creating an opaque web-populism those intentions, beyond channelling protest voting, remain unclear. The evolution of the M5S's political discourse in the context of the tumultuous social changes of Italy and Europe over the past 15 years suggests that the switch from the "left" to the "right" operated between 2011 and 2013 corresponds mostly to the changes in government in Italy: from the Berlusconi era to the ruling of the Democratic Party. In a country as politically polarised as Italy, Grillo was able to attract the former Berlusconi supporters while keeping close the early left-wing sympathisers, disappointed by the austerity measures accepted by the PD and lost in the identity crisis of social movements all around Europe. Furthermore, in the case of migration and of the EU, below the surface of ambiguity and u-turns, the analysis of the blog posts over the years suggests positions closer to right-wing than to left-wing populism; and the main political action taken so far by the Movement has been the alliance with the unambiguously populist right of Nigel Farage.

From the scholar's perspective, however, the M5S remains a particularly interesting subject of study, both because of the usage of digital technology, and for its sudden success, which redefined the Italian political landscape. The fluidity of its discourse makes it even more important to preserve access to the many web sources available. For example, a dedicated analysis to the blog comments would allow to get a better understanding of the dynamics and influences between the party elite and its basis. Even more important would be

a study of the many meetups populating the country, through the minutes available online – the connection between the centralised, digital life of the party, and its presence on the territory. If the availability of these web sources is not undermined, present and future historians will have access to unprecedented granularity; however, this implies that the Italian institutions activate mechanisms to preserve the history of Italy's first digital mass party.

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